10-28-2008

WoW in China and the U.S.

WoW in China and the U.S.

October 28, 2008 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | 1 comment

*World of Warcraft (*WoW*) is the most popular massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) ever created, with more than 10 million players worldwide—half of them in China. Before* WoW *launched in 2004, conventional wisdom placed the potential playerbase for MMOs numbering in the hundreds of thousands.* WoW *quickly broke those numbers, drawing in new gamers with its cartoonish graphics, tongue-in-cheek storylines, and mix of collaborative and solo player options. Stories on* WoW *in China a few years ago emphasized a phenomenon known as "gold farming"—sweatshop laborers in China playing the game to raise in-game currency to then sell for* real *money to overseas players (or, alternatively "power-leveling" those players' characters—playing through the boring early levels of the games with another player's avatar so that the client could more quickly access the endgame content). But most of China's millions of*WoW *players aren't gold farmers—they're regular gamers visiting and enjoying*WoW*'s fantasy world just like players in the U.S. and Europe.*

When we found out UCI Professor of Informatics Bonnie Nardi was conducting comparative studies of WoW *players in China and the U.S. in our own backyard (Blizzard,* WoW*'s developer, is also located in Irvine), we asked Miri Kim if she would sit down for a (fittingly, virtual) chat with Nardi. An avid* WoW *player herself, Nardi had lots of information to share about gaming in China, the U.S., and the virtual space in between.*

Miri Kim: As several commentators on a recent article concerning your research pointed out, many Chinese players play *WoW* in internet cafés, while the majority of players in the U.S. play from personal computers or laptops from home (or even work), or perhaps at occasional LAN (local area network) gatherings, which constitute a unique physical and social space of their own. How important is the physical environment where gamers play in shaping the way they engage with the online digital environments generated by game play?

Bonnie Nardi: The time we spent in Internet cafes in China led us (me and my collaborators Silvia Lindtner, Yang Wang, Scott Mainwaring, He Jing, and Wenjing Liang) to see digital activity as occurring in "mixed realities" which fuse the virtual and the physical. We did not invent the term, but use it to analyze the layered experience of sitting in a café, with its comforts of food, cigarettes, soft drinks, and most importantly, other people, enmeshed at the same time in a rich digital space of

enticing games, movies, social networking software, and other apps. In China, people often play games in Internet cafes with their friends, sometimes from the same immediate neighborhood. They may play awhile and then go out to dinner or for tea. They call each other on their cell phones and text and IM. It's a very stimulating social experience comprised of physical and digital elements.

In North America, while we don't have a lot of Internet cafes, we increasingly find family and friends playing together at home and in dorms. One of my first interviews for the *World of Warcraft* research took me to San Diego to visit three students who played together in their apartment. I will never forget what a shocking mess it was with old pizza boxes strewn around, dirty clothes dumped in the most unlikely places, and hardcore grunge. But the students (all male how did you guess?) were intent on their game. They each sat in their own room with their own computer but they called out to one another and occasionally jumped up to go look at someone else's screen.

The dirty apartment was of course mise en scene for young rebellious males away from Mom for the first time. It provided an appropriate backdrop for the playing of the slightly subversive video game. How do I know it was subversive? A few weeks after the interview, one of the students gave it up for Lent.

I believe that physical space impacts digital experience in interesting ways. I believe those ways are extremely varied, and we are just beginning to understand them. I see mixed realities both East and West. Here's a quote from an interview (conducted in IM by an undergrad researcher; names are pseudonyms) that gives a nice sense of the development of mixed realities in American homes. "Mrs. Pain" is a 39 year old woman who has been married 21 years:

[14:07] Dan: What do you like about the games you play, you already said you like making friends and what else?
[14:07] Mrs. Pain: hmmm
[14:08] Mrs. Pain: and its not just about making friends cause I do have a very busy social life and many friends
[14:08] Mrs. Pain: I think its kinda an excape
[14:08] Mrs. Pain: escape
[14:09] Dan: escape from what?
[14:09] Mrs. Pain: time to relax and have fun
[14:09] Mrs. Pain: from the kids
[14:09] Mrs. Pain: my busy life
[14:09] Dan: So kind of like a stress release?
[14:09] Mrs. Pain: I actually game unstead of watching tv
[14:09] Mrs. Pain: ya
[14:09] Mrs. Pain: a way to get away and have fun with some friends
[14:09] Mrs. Pain: but I am still home for my kids
[14:10] Mrs. Pain: and I am in the same room with my husband who is a gamer

Mrs. Pain points out that she is "in the same room with my husband who is a gamer." This starts looking like the Internet café.

Of course in China, responsible adults do not, for the most part, play games.

I think they are starting to however, or may soon. Wenjing Liang, one of my research assistants from Peking University, found these wonderful photos of a senior center in China at which older people are playing *World of Warcraft*:

Again, the participants are together in the mixed reality of the physical space and digital world.

Kim: What sorts of socialization patterns and processes do you see for new *WoW*players in China and the U.S.? Are there similarities or differences in the way more experienced or established players interact with them? What sort of hierarchies, if any, do incoming players encounter, and what are they based on? What parts of it is determined by the built-in features of the game and how much of it is dependent on individual players?

Nardi: This is a fantastic question but I can't do it justice here. I would have to explain too much about the built-in features of the game and that gets long. I'm working on a book on *World of Warcraft* and it considers this issue not in terms of socialization but in terms of guild social dynamics and gender. It takes two chapters to try to untangle the issues.

Kim: A common but increasingly outdated stereotype of people who play videogames is that this group is mostly composed of young (single) men who aren't very engaged with the outside world, but do you see *WoW* appealing to many different demographic/cultural/ethnic groups? What might be similarities or differences, if any, in how *WoW* players break down into different social categories – externally defined or internally identified – between U.S. and China?

Nardi: Research by Nick Yee at Stanford indicates that about 20-25 percent of North American *WoW* players are female. That seems right to me.

In China we counted about 10 per cent female in the Internet cafes. There are no data I know of that count those at home and of course my data from the cafes are very limited. There is no gender analysis for any other country. So we just don't know. But I think we can say *WoW* is more female friendly than the shooters which attract almost no women.

Most of the women I have interviewed, in both China and North America, or whom I met in-game, started playing with boyfriend, husband, brother, or other male relative or friend. Sometimes the women become much more interested in the game and stay longer than the men.

I think the big barrier that *WoW* breaks is social class. One afternoon I was playing and voice chatting with a young guy who was telling me about how he was fired from the Home Depot. I was like "Gak!! I don't know anyone who works at the Home Depot in real life." I would just never meet these people. I live in Uni Hills with a bunch of professors and have a second home in Half Moon Bay on a street where all my immediate neighbors have Ph.Ds. or law degrees. But in-game I do meet lots of interesting people different from me. Here's an excerpt from my book that describes socioeconomic diversity in *WoW*:

One player in my guild was a military wife whose husband had been to Iraq three times on the front lines. Another lived on what he called a "hamburger farm," raising cattle in Missouri. Many players worked weekend or late-night shifts. One would often log on telling us he smelled like grease from working in his brother's restaurant. The guild included engineers, programmers, students, retail clerks, a real estate agent, an architect, a truck driver, a machinist, traveling salespeople, a worker at a health spa, a commercial pilot, a bartender, an emergency medical technician, a stocker at a big box store, a city bus driver, someone who drove a billboard on a truck through a large city, a disabled man who lost his job because of chronic illness, and many others. There were about 200 people in the guild. Most were male, but about 20 percent were female. Female members included graduate students, a chef, a receptionist, a veterinarian, and a young girl who played with her brother and cousin.

I can tell you that there are a lot of married people playing *WoW*. Some with each other and sometimes as an individual pursuit. There are lots of parents. Players stop play to put kids to bed, to feed them, to tend to their needs. It is most definitely not just single young guys.

I wish I knew more about ethnicity. In my guild most of the pictures posted on the guild website showed white people, although we had a group of brothers of Pacific Island descent and a few Asian-American players. I have an in-game friend from Mexico and one from Brazil. But I don't have any good statistics.

Here's an anecdote from my book about age and family relations:

While I was standing in a long line to purchase memorabilia at the 2008 BlizzCon conference [an event sponsored by Blizzard Entertainment, the maker of *World of Warcraft*], an older man and a younger woman stood in front of me. The man (probably recognizing a familiar life form) turned around and said in a friendly way, "What characters do you play?" We got to talking and he turned out to the be the woman's father. They both played as did the man's son. He said he played, "So I have something to talk to my kids about." The woman had met her husband in *WoW*. They played together casually at first, then started talking in voice chat, then arranged a face to face meeting, although they lived across the country from one other. Things went well and they got married, had a baby, and seemed to be living happily ever after. Baby was in the hotel with hubby and grandma, who also played, so that mom and granddad could have a bit of free time at BlizzCon.

In China we also met people from varied social classes. They included students, a factory worker, a middle school teacher, a bank employee, a marketing supervisor, a vice president of design for a Chinese game company, and a venture capital broker. As mentioned, there is less age diversity among *WoW* players than in North America.

Kim: When online, individuals have more leeway in how they present themselves to others thanks to the anonymous, semi-anonymous, and pseudonymous conditions facilitated by the Internet. Do you see different or similar patterns between players in the two countries in the way they choose to construct and perform, say, gender identities through their in-game characters/avatars?

Nardi: Many of my findings are common to North America and China. Players in both places enjoyed the social experience of *World of Warcraft*, the beautiful graphics, the challenge and mastery entailed in the game. But there was an interesting gender difference.

In North America, Nick Yee found that about 23 per cent of characters played by real life males were female characters. In China there is something of a prohibition against this practice. Male players who play female characters risk being called "lady-boys." As far as I can tell, this term (人妖 renyao) connotes transvestite or transsexual. I tried to pin down my research assistants on the exact meaning, but they were a little vague. China is a more puritanical country than the U.S., and I think they themselves (who were young women just starting graduate school) were not exactly sure of how far the connotations stretched. They definitely invoked transsexuals in trying to explain the concept to me.

This is the kind of cultural interpretation that is tricky but I bring it up because it was mentioned in the interviews a lot. Here are some examples (with pseudonyms). One player stated flatly:

I hate such ladyboy characters.

Another said he always played males. We asked why.

I don't know. I just dislike turning into a ladyboy. Although the game is a virtual one, a boy is supposed to be a boy and a girl is supposed to be a girl….Before this game, I played a Chinese game in which boys and girls could get married. If the two are both boys, I would feel disgusted.

Players repeated this theme:

Dai: My characters are all male. If I picked a female character, they would call me a ladyboy.

Guang: If you are a boy but you play a female character, others will call you ladyboy. I don't want to be called that.

Jian: It's strange to play a female. I do not like the way people look at you if you play a female character. I don't like people mistaking me for a female.

Quan: I don't like the way it feels to play a female character. It doesn't feel comfortable. I don't like the way other players look at me and talk to me then.

A male player began with a female character because he liked the way it looked. But he soon gave up:

When I was first developing my character, the female one, it was always really troublesome to explain that I am a guy in real life. The male is more natural.

A female player who played a female character said:

Sometimes people mistake me for a man and they call me ladyboy. But I don't care.

Sometimes males did play female characters despite the issue of ladyboys. We asked Chinese male players who played females if they sought a new kind of experience or identity. They answered as American males had:

Interviewer: Is playing a female also a kind of experience change?
Chen: No, it is not. I am a male myself and it is not interesting if there is a male in front of me and I have to face him every day. If your character is a female, it will be more pleasing to both the eye and the mind.

That answer always makes me laugh about him facing a male character! American males said they played female characters because they liked to look at them. Same reasoning.

Kim: Do *WoW* players, would you guess, have other applications or programs open simultaneously, (Using instant messaging, video chat unrelated to *WoW*, using email, listening to music, playing another game, for example.) or do you find that players immerse themselves 100 percent in *WoW* when they play? Does this differ between Chinese and U.S. players?

Nardi: In both places *WoW* players are running other applications (and I am not guessing!). In China people ran applications such as QQ (a Chinese IM), they talked on their cell phones, they talked to people sitting beside them. So there is no 100 percent immersion in *WoW*. However, many Chinese players discussed how much they had to concentrate carefully during raids (one of the hardest activities in the game). They were very aware of the need to perform competently so they would not spoil the play experiences of their guildmates.

We find pretty much the same in North America. People focus during raids (at least when learning new encounters), but otherwise may be doing other things. I know that while some players have given up television for games like *WoW*, others watch while they play, at least during activities that don't take much concentration. North American players often have special playlists they turn to while in *WoW*. (I personally love the *WoW* music and would never listen to anything else, but I think I'm in a minority.) In guild chat, players often discuss what new music they can find to listen to while playing.

WoW does not demand full concentration at all times because its activities are so varied. The most competitive forms of the game (raids and arena play) are pretty cognitively demanding and get players' full attention, or close to it, while activities like fishing can literally be done by seven year olds (I taught my niece to fish for me).

Kim: What are the organizational mechanisms by which social relationships fostered through game-play translate into real-life, if and when this occurs? As in, what real-life kinds of activities do *WoW* players in China and the U.S. use to socialize in relation to actual gameplay? For example, do players arrange and participate in meet-ups, release parties, and so on?

Nardi: The first interview we did in China was with five young men who had assembled in an Internet café to play *WoW*, to be followed by dinner at a nearby restaurant. Some of them knew each other before they started playing and a couple had been added to the group as they met each other while playing in the*wang ba*. The Internet cafes of course foster face to face interaction. Here's a typical quote:

Sometimes, when I come to play at the Internet cafe, I meet people here. So these people, I would get their QQ ID to stay in touch. People who sit next to you in the cafe or I know from real life, we are more inclined to keep in touch.

Because of the prevalence of Internet cafes in China, social relationships easily spanned the virtual and the real.

As mentioned, in North America, people often start playing with family and friends, so the game extends real life connections. Some of my guildmates would visit each other when they traveled, meeting people in real life that they previously knew only in-game. Some guilds met at BlizzCon (the Blizzard Conference). At BlizzCon I attended some gatherings of modders (people who write software extensions for the game). Most of the time they hang out together in IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels, but they value the opportunity to meet face to face annually at BlizzCon. In addition to the guild where I conduct my research, I also belong to a guild of professional colleagues. I met some of them for the first time at BlizzCon. I knew their voices from voice chat. It was really fun.

Voice chat is an important way the game spans real and virtual experience. Voice is very powerful. It reveals all kinds of things about you. Your gender, roughly your age, whether you have a sense of humor, if you are quiet, or talk a lot, and so on. It makes it hard to have a different personality online. I often hear that people have different online personalities, but I wonder how they do it, at least if they are using voice chat.

Kim: Finally, I'd like to ask, are there online games, MMORPGs or otherwise, that are popular in China but not in the U.S.? What makes a game created in one region likely to be popular in another? Are there identifiable cross-cultural or cross-lingual channels though which players from different countries start, or pick up on, a trend in gaming, and if so, what forms and processes do they take?

Nardi: I don't know a lot about Chinese games. Some of the Chinese players told us that many Chinese games are oriented to a single hero who performs all kinds of amazing feats. They pointed out that *WoW* is different in that it requires collaboration for many activities. They really liked that about WoW. They seemed eager for activities that needed teams. One player, for example, said:

After I played *WoW* for awhile, I realized it's more meaningful than other games because of the collaboration.

Knowing what makes a game cross-culturally appealing is of course a huge question. Here are things both Chinese and North American players mentioned that they liked about *WoW*:

Visually stimulating (colors, animations, scenery)
Very polished, with attention to small details
Teamwork
Challenge
Sense of mastery

WoW is marketed in China through The9, which distributes a lot of games. Chinese players go there to find games and I'm sure that's how they discovered*WoW*. So there is a pretty clear channel. It's worth noting that about half the ten million *WoW* players are Chinese. They are really an important market and Blizzard was going to make sure they got to them if at all possible.

Beyond abstract formulas about what works in games, I think it's interesting when people can have particular cross-cultural experiences in games. I'll close with a snippet from an interview:

Chen: I learned several things about the West. *WoW* has a Western story, which is different from Eastern stories and history…The game belongs to the whole Western culture. Mages, druids, and so on originate from Western myths, and are relevant to the whole Western myth of the story.
Some *WoW* races like gnomes, dwarves, and elves, and also dragons, are described in European myths.
BN: Doesn't China have dragons?
Chen: Dragons are different with us. Western dragons are evil while Chinese dragons stand for happiness.

Tags: MMO, World of Warcraft, WoW